

The dramatic plight of academics in Erdogan's Turkey

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Formerly a sociology lecturer at a major Turkish University, Ayse Yilmaz said she did not plan to spend half the year in several European countries trapped between multiple visa applications and fearing having to return to Turkey, a country where, she said, she did not feel safe anymore.

"I loved my students in Turkey. I had not planned to leave at all," she said recently. "I miss it very much."

She was one of many caught in the maelstrom of Turkey's ongoing crackdown. Almost a year after the coup attempt of July 15, 2016, more than 130,000 people have been dismissed from state jobs, monitoring group Turkey Purge said, and more than 50,000 have been jailed on terrorism charges. Included in that figure are military personnel, police officers, journalists, civil servants and academics. More than 8,270 scholars have been fired and 15 universities have been shut down.

■ Hundreds of academics are thought to have left Turkey in a forced brain drain.

The government initially claimed that the purges targeted supporters of the Gulen movement that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) blamed for the coup attempt. Soon, however, all government critics were cast as coup plotters and traitors, including human rights activists, Kurdish politicians or the secular opposition. The massive crackdown has left universities gut-

ted and some departments desperately understaffed.

Yilmaz, a pseudonym used for safety reasons, said that the purges and the dismissals via government decree provided a convenient cover for increasing repression of all dissent in Turkey. "Before the government put pressure on the universities to discipline or fire critics. With the coup attempt, the state of emergency and the possibility to fire people via decree the purges became very easy," Yilmaz said.

She is among the more than 2,200 Turkish academics who signed a peace petition in January 2016, urging the Turkish government to end the violent crackdown on the population in south-eastern Turkey and find a peaceful solution to the Kurdish conflict, which has killed more than 40,000 people since it began more than three decades ago.

Nationalist students at her university threatened her after she put her name to the petition. Some left menacing notes at her office door.

"I felt stuck between the violence of the state and the violence at the university," she said, adding that many students were very supportive. "The pressure was not the same for everyone who had signed the petition. Some universities almost immediately fired those who had signed but those who remained were all aware that we could be next."

The AKP government declared the "peace academics" to be "traitors." Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan targeted the petitioners in no less than five public speeches and a convicted crime lord announced that he wished "to shower in their blood."

"The potential of violence increased a lot after the coup attempt," Yilmaz said. "The government decrees made it possible to fire people overnight, making resistance against the pres-

sure much harder because everything became more arbitrary.

She said she did not want to leave Turkey "but it became harder to just do your job."

She said that, in February, following an especially violent police crackdown on protests against the purge of academics, she decided to leave Turkey. "That night, as I washed the tear gas off my face I started to wonder about a way out," Yilmaz said.

Having been accepted to a long-coveted post-doctoral programme at a German university, she said she was worried that the Turkish government might confiscate her passport and bar her from leaving the country, as they had done with tens of thousands of others.

Yilmaz said she used to enjoy travelling for her job and spent considerable time abroad during her studies. "But this time is different," she said. "I did not want to leave. I was exiled from Turkey."

She is not the only one. Hundreds are thought to have left Turkey in this forced brain drain. The US-based solidarity network Scholars at Risk reported to have received more than 300 applications from academics in Turkey since last July, more than they have received from the country since the network began in 1999.

The Scholar Rescue Fund also reports that application numbers from Turkey are "unprecedented." Some academics were driven to suicide over their dismissal and academic Nuriye Gulmen and primary school teacher Semih Ozakca, have been on hunger strike for more than 100 days to be reinstated into their jobs.

Academia was never free in Turkey. The state controls all universities via the Higher Education Council (YOK), founded after the brutal military coup in 1980. The council has been involved in policing and



Purged institution. Academics lay down their gowns during a protest against the dismissal of their colleagues at the Cebeci campus of Ankara University.

(Reuters)

firing of academics since the 2016 coup attempt. Many scholars in Turkey have long been involved in struggles for women's rights, Kurdish rights and the freedom to wear a headscarf at university. Now, with the breakdown of the judiciary in Turkey, the situation has become more arbitrary, and therefore, in many ways, worse.

"There is no more academia in Turkey now," said Nil Mutluer, a professor of sociology and a long-time human rights activist. It is not the first time she has been blacklisted in Turkey and the AKP government is not the first targeting her for being "a traitor," she said.

"Things are getting worse," Mutluer said. "The worst thing is that the purges have weakened the state. It will take a very long time to restore these purged institutions. The legal system was never proper or just but at least the state used to feel the need to create evidence or erase evidence. Now nobody cares about the evidence anymore. This means that there is no functioning state now, everything is arbitrary. We don't know where the red lines are."

Putting her signature on the call for peace in the Kurdish region was

not a big thing in her eyes.

"They won't fire you for [the petition]. It's the lamest thing you ever did," a friend of hers joked then. He was wrong. Before she was dismissed from her job in February 2016, she was the head of the sociology department of Nisantasi University in Istanbul. Now she is a Philipp Schwartz Fellow at Humboldt University's Diversity and Social Conflict Department in Berlin, a fellowship awarded to scholars at risk.

Mutluer said she is grateful for the support and the solidarity she has received but stressed that European countries need to be self-critical and go beyond the verbal vilification of Erdogan and his AKP government. "The refugee deal and the weapons they sell in the region perpetuate violent conflict, repression and suffering," she said. "There also needs to be a harsher reaction to what is happening in Turkey, for example economic sanctions."

She also said she has not given up hope. "Better times will come and we will continue fighting for them," Mutluer said.

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Turkey's disarray continues to unravel

Viewpoint



Yavuz Baydar

"Peace at home, peace in the world" was a motto coined by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founding father of the Republic of Turkey. What has been happening over the past five years with Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the cockpit, however, has proved just the opposite.

In many ways, Turkey has become a case study for how a steadily erratic leadership can tie domestic and foreign policy in a knot and produce instability.

Signs are increasingly alarming. On the domestic front, Turkey has become a stage for venting rage. Large numbers of people who disagree with growing oppression are up in arms, adamant that they will not let the country's shift to autocracy proceed quietly. More than 30,000 civilians, the majority seemingly women, marched "for justice," in a protest led by Kemal Kilicdaroglu, leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP).

The route begins in Ankara and ends in a jail on the outskirts of Istanbul, where a CHP deputy with a background in journalism was sentenced to 25 years in prison for "leaking state secrets" to the Cumhuriyet newspaper. The "secrets" were a file on how "secret service lorries" allegedly carried weaponry to jihadist groups in Syria.

In general, paranoia and rage define the government's policy-

making. A recent indictment against six investigative journalists revealed how sensitive "the palace" has become. "Suspects" were detained for reporting on the content of the hacked e-mail account of the energy minister, who is Erdogan's son-in-law. They could be sentenced to 15 years in prison.

The arrest of journalists has become routine, strengthening Erdogan's grip on the Turkish media, which is up to 90% controlled by the government.

Platform for Independent Journalism (P24), a monitoring unit in Istanbul, said there were 166 journalists in jail. This is more than half of the journalists jailed worldwide.

Although many do not want to admit it, Turks wake up to a more brutal reality every day. Such oppression, aimed at building a solid autocracy, is a vicious circle, feeding off itself in every turn. It long ago passed the threshold of absurdity.

Linking dissidents to last year's coup attempt has become a pattern. This shows the courts' level of disarray and desperation. The judiciary is under full-scale political duress and must fill in the blanks with charges.

This vicious circle is proof of how badly Turkey's rule of law has crashed and explains why the opposition party's long march is simply about justice. A look at data from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) shows how far the oppressive measures have gone.

Politico, a Washington publication, reported that about one-quarter of cases pending at the ECHR – 23,000 – have been filed

against Ankara. "According to the court's registry, 17,630 of these were filed since the failed coup on July 15 last year," Politico said. "The number of cases that make their way to Strasbourg also marks a staggering increase compared to previous years – 2,212 cases were lodged against Turkey in 2015 and 1,584 in 2014."

This vast domestic ordeal is only part of Turkey's reality. Its foreign policy is equally dramatic, ringing alarms daily. It should not come as a surprise that the country's foreign affairs policies reflect the level of disorder and poor decision-making domestically.

"Ten years ago, Turkey was perceived as a strong honest broker in its region" Unal Cevikoz, a former top Turkish diplomat, wrote in the Hurriyet Daily News. "As a facilitator, Turkey was active from Afghanistan to the Balkans, from the Caucasus to the Middle East. In the east, Turkey was able to bring together Afghanistan and Pakistan in a trilateral format to contribute to the search for the resolution of the Afghan problem... Turkey put forth economic development projects focusing on infrastructure in Palestine and was able to establish an indirect but functional dialogue between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. In those years, Syria was perhaps one of the closest neighbours Turkey had."

This is a distant memory. Turkey is widely perceived as an unpredictable player. This is true when it comes to the Qatar crisis and the Cyprus talks. It is reflective of its flip-flopping between the United States and Russia on Syria. Turkey has become so

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slippery that it invites little, if any, trust. The way it has shelved its recent conflicts with Egypt and Israel has been working against it, surely.

The reason is simple at the core: The more centralised the decision-making becomes under Erdogan; the more Turkey perceives domestic and international challenges as my way or the highway. Erdogan may have the security tools to assert his way at home but seems doomed to fail abroad.

It is known that behind closed doors he shows pragmatism – what a Greek diplomat called "belly-dancing" – but such an approach damages Turkey's reputation and its national interests.

As Cevikoz "diplomatically" concluded:

"Turkey's image is seriously transforming from an honest broker to a spoiler. To maintain a positive perception, Turkey's foreign policy needs to be objective, egalitarian and equidistant to all the actors who may be in a position to contribute to the solution of a dispute. For this, dialogue is the best way of communication.

"An intelligent and constructive communications strategy may positively influence perceptions about Turkey in the region again. In the absence of such a strategy, foreign policy is reduced to an instrument of closed and paranoid domestic policy."

The question is whether it is too late for such adjustments.

Yavuz Baydar is a Turkish journalist and occasional contributor to The Arab Weekly.

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